

## The End Of A Five Decade Quest

Bob Dylan And The Band  
The Basement Tapes Complete  
Columbia Legacy

by Peter Stone Brown

It's late in 1968. Winter. I'm standing outside freezing on the steps of someone's apartment in Southwest Philadelphia. I just gave the guy in the apartment 25 bucks (a lot of money back then) to have him shut the door, leaving me hoping he'll come back with a reel of recording tape I'd spent months searching for. The experience was exactly like buying pot except most dealers let you inside for a taste. It turned out that purchase was the beginning of a quest that would continue for 46 years. On that tape were the 13 Bob Dylan songs an article in a then new magazine, *Rolling Stone* dubbed "The Basement Tapes."

Back up a year to November 1967. There had been no new music from Bob Dylan since his motorcycle accident on July 29, 1966. In May '67, a reporter from the *New York Daily News* found his house and briefly interviewed him. The following fall, the *New York Times* ran a couple of one-inch stories on the state of Dylan's contract with Columbia Records. Then one November night, New York folk DJ Jerry White debuted a single of a new Bob Dylan song done by Peter, Paul & Mary, "Too Much of Nothing." covered by Peter, Paul & Mary. The song was soon eclipsed by the news that Dylan had recorded a new album in Nashville, *John Wesley Harding*, that appeared in record stores on January 2, 1968. Not long after, Radio Unnameable host Bob Fass played a new Dylan song, "Down In The Flood," done amazingly enough by Flatt and Scruggs, and the next six months saw several new Dylan covers including Manfred Mann's hit, "The Mighty Quinn." In July *Music From Big Pink* by the group that had backed Dylan on tour in '65 and '66 had three more Dylan songs, two of them his first collaborations. One of the songs "This Wheel's On Fire" by Julie Driscoll, Brian Auger and The Trinity had already been a hit in England.

The tape I bought that day was generations removed from the original, the sound quality terrible, but the best songs had a scary intensity. While I was still delving into the songs, Dylan made a surprise TV appearance, his first since the crash, in a documentary on Johnny Cash show on National Educational Television, the predecessor to PBS. The shot was of a recording studio with Dylan and Cash facing each other on a duet of Dylan's "One Too Many Mornings" played to the Johnny Cash beat. Short haired, bearded, and

chewing gum, Dylan sang with a voice no one had heard before. Deep and smooth, it was the voice that would appear on *Nashville Skyline* released a month later.

By then bootleg records had started to hit the East Coast, which for me meant no more reel to reel tapes. The most famous, *Great White Wonder* appeared in an unmarked white jacket with a blank label on the records itself. The album confused a lot of people because it featured seven Basement Tapes songs interspersed with outtakes from *Bringing It All Back Home* and *Highway 61 Revisited* and even earlier recordings.

A few years later, a few more songs leaked.. Then in the spring of 1975 on Mary Travers' radio show, Bob Dylan announced *The Basement Tapes* would be released. The album, a two-record set was controversial among Dylan's fans because it included songs by The Band as well, some that had nothing to do with the period in question, and a couple of songs had overdubs in attempt by Robbie Robertson and engineer Rob Fraboni to create a decent sounding '70s album.

Eleven years later, a friend visited from California brought with him two double-record bootlegs titled *Blind Boy Grunt & The Hawks* containing 43 additional tracks. Some were alternate versions, several songs were by The Band including a session with Tiny Tim. By this time bootlegs had artwork and liner notes. The big revelation was not only original songs were recorded. There were old folk and blues songs, country and western songs and Curtis Mayfield's "People Get Ready."

Fast forward another ten years. It's now the '90s and suddenly there's a bunch of bootleg CDs titled *The Genuine Basement Tapes* or *After The Crash* and there's even more originals and covers. In 2001 two different companies issued a lavish four disc set complete with a booklet, liner notes and other goodies, *A Tree With Roots*. In 2009, another bootleg *Mixing Up The Medicine*, which was the Basement Safety masters in the best quality yet that was "liberated from the collection of Neil Young."

I would've thought that was it, but earlier this year I had a chance to talk to a person who is generally considered the supreme Dylan archivist who told me there's even more. The question of how much more was answered on August 26<sup>th</sup> when I woke up to an email from a friend titled, "Well, Alright!" The email was a link to an announcement that *The Basement Tapes Complete* was being issued on November 4<sup>th</sup> by Columbia Records as the 11<sup>th</sup> installment of *The Bootleg Series*. Six discs, 138 tracks, 30 of which never heard until now, the largest

Bootleg Series so far, presented in chronological order without overdubs restored to sound as close to the original as possible.

So why the fuss about a bunch of recordings that mostly happened in the basement of a pink house in Saugerties New York, recorded with only a few microphones that were originally intended to be demos of new songs and nothing more?

There are some who would say and I'm one of them that these recordings contain some of the best singing Bob Dylan ever did in addition to being the missing link between *Blonde On Blonde* and *John Wesley Harding* and show a whole other side of the collaboration of Dylan and The Band, though this set only includes Dylan recordings.

The music can be put into three initial categories serious songs, funny songs and covers. But within those categories are subcategories. Some songs that start out sounding like a joke end up being serious. The covers include several traditional folk songs showing that while Dylan may have left the New York folk scene he did not by any means abandon folk music. There are covers of songs by Dylan's contemporaries from the folk scene including three Ian and Sylvia songs as well as Pete Seeger's "The Bells of Rhymney." There are also a couple of blues songs and a couple of old rock and roll songs. There is no indication that either Dylan or The Band were listening to any of the rock and roll or pop music that was happening in 1967. The inclusion of "Baby Ain't That Fine," by Dallas Frazier, a great songwriter best known for his country songs but who also straddled R&B possibly indicates that Dylan was more interested in what was coming out of Nashville and Memphis than England or San Francisco.

Levon Helm who had quit the Dylan tour in late 1965 had not yet returned when these recordings started. Most of the tracks have no drums though occasionally Richard Manuel or Robbie Robertson would play drums. Because no original notes were taken and because all the musicians were multi-instrumentalists there is no track by track listing of who plays what. The one constant throughout appears to be Rick Danko on bass.

When Levon and The Hawks joined Bob Dylan on the beyond chaotic world tour that actually started in the fall of '65, they were seasoned road musicians steeped in blues, R&B and rockabilly, but they were basically a bar band mostly playing in Canada with occasional trips to the South and elsewhere. They were thrown into one of the most chaotic tours in rock and roll history, traveling by plane instead of car, getting booed at almost every show playing behind a who who'd just reached stardom playing songs that while blues based at the core

lyrically were nothing like the R&B covers they'd been playing. Between press conferences, all night after show parties, with a constant entourage, they probably never really had a chance to know each other. The feeling of the majority of these recordings is of musicians getting to know each other by creating music and having a lot of fun in the process.

The 13 songs from the original demo tape show that Dylan had stripped down his writing style. Most of the songs have three or four verses and wildly inventive choruses on which he is joined by Manuel or Danko singing harmony. Dylan would further strip things down for *John Wesley Harding* where all the songs with two exceptions had three verses and no chorus.

Several of the tracks here are songs in progress. Some were completed, some abandoned. As with the other volumes of *The Bootleg Series*, it provides more than a glimpse of how Dylan creates. Some songs and early takes have dummy words until the real words appear. In some cases they never did. In other cases Dylan sings something that has the sound and feel of the word he's looking for. Some of the songs have verses that sound like nonsense with images that make no sense. There are times that Dylan and the guys in The Band crack up at the lines he just sang. But for all the nonsensical lines and images, is there really that much difference between "one bird book a buzzard and a crow" from "Tiny Montgomery" or a "tea preacher who looked so baffled" from *Blonde On Blonde's* "Memphis Blues Again"?

On the more serious songs, "Tears Of Rage," "I Shall Be Released," "This Wheel's On Fire," "Too Much of Nothing," "I'm Not There," "Sign On The Cross" and "I'm Not There," there is a feeling that Dylan is not singing about earthly concerns. On these songs and several others, there's a sadness in his voice that simply wasn't there on his earlier recordings. On some songs that might seem initially nonsensical such as "Please Mrs. Henry," or "Open the Door Homer," there are images and verses that suggest a newfound spirituality. The last verse of the latter song begins:

*"Take care of all your memories"  
Said my friend, Mick  
"For you cannot relive them.  
And remember when you're out there  
Tryin' to heal the sick  
That you must always  
First forgive them."*

The hysterical "Please Mrs. Henry," which on the surface sounds like a song about being drunk has these lines:

*I'm a thousand years old and I'm a generous bomb  
I'm t-boned and punctured  
I've been known to be calm*

I've spent a lot of time wondering whether bomb is really balm and who or what is t-boned and punctured and a thousand years old.

For all the serious songs, there's a lot of laughter, a lot parody and joking around, but also exploration but also a deep look at the broad musical influences of all involved.

With a set of this size it would take a book to do a track by track examination. Instead, some of my favorite tracks starting with the covers.

"The Auld Triangle" is one of the greatest Dylan recordings ever. Also known as "The Royal Canal," Brendan Behan wrote the song for his play "The Quare Fellow." It is one of the great prison songs and one of the great Irish songs. I've been listening to this song for about 20 years and rare is the time I can play it without playing it again. Dylan's voice is stunning as the Band fill in behind him clearly improvising creating a sort of folk rock sound with Garth Hudson alternating between harpsichord and organ. Dylan could have learned the song from the Clancy Brothers or Ian and Sylvia. Several Irish folk groups have recorded it.

"Spanish Is The Loving Tongue," probably learned from Ian Tyson, Dylan would record it again for the sessions of *Self Portrait* and *New Morning* eventually performing it once in San Antonio in 1976. Also in the ballad department, are two songs with Dylan playing 12-string, the Scottish whaling song, "Bonnie Ship The Diamond" and "Young But Daily Growing," a traditional English ballad with a Scottish connection. Both are terrific examples of why Dylan is one of the greatest folksingers of all time. "Young But Daily Growing" is one of the great examples of ballad singing by anyone.

Never bootlegged or heard until it was streamed on the internet last week is "900 Miles," a song I easily played at least 30 times before my copy of the set arrived. A total surprise, it is stunningly beautiful. The funny thing is it is not the traditional song "900 Miles." The melody is really "500 Miles," a song done by the Kingston Trio and Peter, Paul & Mary among many others. Dylan left out the "Lord, I'm one, Lord I'm two" part and clearly is making up the rest as he's singing, often

singing words that aren't words. It doesn't matter. It hits you in the heart immediately.

Also up there are the three Ian and Sylvia songs, "Four Strong Winds," "The French Girl" and "Song For Canada," which appeared on boots under the title "One Single River." The special one is the 2<sup>nd</sup> take of "The French Girl" from Ian and Sylvia's *Play One More* album. Dylan passionately treats the song with the utmost respect. He would try it again years later in rehearsal with the Grateful Dead.

Another surprise cover is "Mr. Blue." Dylan sings the first verse and either Danko or Robertson laughs in acknowledgment. Dylan softly croons in a voice close to *Nashville Skyline*.

A major discovery are the songs that open Disc 5 which according to reports was actually recorded after most people thought *The Basement Tapes* were finished. There are three older Dylan songs, "Blowin' In The Wind," "One Too Many Mornings" and "It Ain't Me, Babe." Clearly present on drums on these songs is Levon Helm since all other instruments are accounted for. "Blowin' In The Wind" is done to a blues beat that almost turns into gospel by the end with Robertson really letting loose on the guitar solo. It is not anything like the version on *Before The Flood*. The total mind blower is "One Too Many Mornings." In an arrangement startlingly close to the way they did it in 1966, it starts with Richard Manuel singing the first verse. He blows a line but it doesn't matter. Danko and Dylan join him on the "behind" just like 1966. When Dylan comes in on the second verse it's holy shit time, and they pull off a key change for a guitar solo. While it's close it is not as strident and chaotic as the live version. "It Ain't Me Babe" is the most straightforward version that I know of performed with The Band.

Also on the disc 5 are two takes of "Ain't No More Cane," one of the Band songs from the released *Basement Tapes* and one they performed at their early concerts, only this time it's Dylan singing lead. I prefer the first take. There are also three songs with Dylan playing autoharp backed only by bass and someone possibly Richard Manuel on harmonica, "Wildwood Flower," "One Kind Favor," and "She'll Be Coming Round The Mountain." "One Kind Favor," is really Blind Lemon Jefferson's "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean," an unusual choice for autoharp. Singing the song way slower than his earlier version in a voice that's very close to *Nashville Skyline*, Dylan gets more into it with each verse.

The sixth disc is a bonus disc in which no attempt was made to clean up the sound. A few of the songs have previously appeared on

bootlegs and the sound quality varies from track to track. It was included because these are the only recordings of these songs.

As amazing as many of the cover songs are it is the original songs and the way Dylan sings them that makes this set important along with the fact that for the first time they are finally all together in the order they were written and recorded.

On the beyond incredible "I'm Not There," "This Wheel's On Fire," "Tears of Rage," "I Shall Be Released," "Too Much Of Nothing," and the never before heard "Wild Wolf," Dylan is in another zone entirely, one not of this earth. Decades ago when a friend who is deeply into the blues first heard Dylan's version of "This Wheel's On Fire," he said, "Only Robert Johnson is this scary."

The set, perhaps the most beautiful package of any Bootleg Series comes in a slipcase with one book containing the discs and liner notes designed to look like an old reel to reel tape box. There are three liner notes, the first by Sid Griffin who wrote a book on the recordings that was recently revived, "Million Dollar Bash," deals with the songs and the music. The second by Dylan biographer Clinton Heylin is a detailed and dizzying history of the evolution of the various tapes, a totally wild tale. The third is by engineer Jan Haust who worked with Garth Hudson who originally recorded and archived the tapes on the restoration. The second is a book of photos of Dylan and The Band around the time of the recordings, pictures from the session for famed cover of the first Basement Tapes release, and pics of the various bootleg records, articles about them and memos from Columbia Records on what to do about them.

There is also a two disc version called *The Basement Tapes Raw*, but serious Dylan fans will want the box set.

In the four plus decades since Dylan and The Band recorded these songs, there's been two books and innumerable articles about what went on that basement and following this release there will undoubtedly be many more. Many undoubtedly will say it was the beginning of what is now referred to as Americana Music. Dylan, who's always been somewhat disparaging about the recordings answered that in a 1984 interview by Kurt Loder in *Rolling Stone*:

"People have told me they think it's very Americana and all that. I don't know what they're talkin' about."

I have to agree. In decades of listening to these recordings in varying quality what I've always heard is a singer sharing some of his favorite

songs in hopes of finding the inspiration to create new ones. The joys and treasures of both can be found on these six discs.